

# SOVIET AFFAIRS ANALYSIS SERVICE

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## Outline of Reference Paper On:

### "GLOOM AND DESPAIR" IN THE SOVIET CINEMA

Recent Soviet film production has revealed a desire on the part of writers and directors to portray Soviet life as it is, and to stress humanity, humility and the spiritual values, rather than "Socialist Realism." At a session of the Art Film Council held in Moscow at the beginning of this year, Party spokesmen severely criticized this tendency and demanded more films about the "beautiful life" of the Soviet people. Since then, the Soviet press has echoed official dissatisfaction: "In many films, the sufferings of little, downtrodden people are presented endlessly, and with relish the makers of films make their heroes burst into tears," Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote on February 16, 1960. However, there is evidence that Soviet filmmakers are with some degree of success continuing to evade overly strict Party controls and to ignore the "sacred principles" of the "Party nature of art," whenever they feel they can get away with it.

Thus, the Party is now paying the price for its past demand that Soviet films deal with subjects taken from real life. Writers and directors have hastened to take these demands seriously and have frequently managed to portray contemporary Soviet life in its actual, unattractive and sometimes even tragic light.

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### "GLOOM AND DESPAIR" IN THE SOVIET CINEMA

In recent months, new Soviet films have been sharply criticized by the Party for depicting Soviet conditions in a "gloomy" light instead of reflecting the "heroic" or "joyful" aspects of life which the Party demands. This new tone of Soviet films points to a desire by film producers for a more objective presentation of life than has been previously possible.

There are over 90,000 movie theaters in the USSR today which cater to approximately 15,000,000 people daily (*Sovetsky Ekran*, Soviet Screen, 1960, No. 2). During the last two or three years, production of films in the USSR rose from 5 or 10 to 100 films a year. During the last few months, many of them have been severely criticized on ideological grounds. At the beginning of this year, an extended session of the Art Film Council of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR was held in Moscow to discuss the subject "Soviet Cinematography and Contemporary Life." (The Soviet term "art film" is used to distinguish feature films from documentaries). The two-day meeting was attended by senior Party officials, representatives of the Soviet government and the All-Union Central Committee of the Komsomol (Young Communist League) as well as those engaged in film work in the various union republics.

The Soviet film industry had previously been subjected to criticism in resolutions of the Party Central Committee, during the postwar years. During that period, only individual films were attacked as part of the overall repression of the arts by Stalin's propaganda chief, A. A. Zhdanov. Now, however, the overwhelming majority of new films are the objects of Party censure on ideological grounds.

The producers are accused of refusing to deal with "contemporary life" and of lack of emphasis on patriotic themes. These points are stressed frequently in the press. Very few films deal with such fundamental themes as the struggle for peace throughout the world and the building of Communism. (*Iskusstvo Kino*, Cinema Art, 1960, No. 2, p. 7).

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In a leading article in Literaturnaya Gazeta, Literary Gazette, on January 21, 1960, Party theoreticians in the field of the arts had this to say about the state of the film art in the USSR:

When one carefully studies the state of our film production, one cannot but see a striking and alarming gulf between life and its representation on the screen. . . . We cannot close our eyes to the fact that of these hundreds of films, only a few are expressions of profound achievements, of great and resounding ideas!

In an article entitled "Certain Questions Concerning the Development of Soviet Culture" (Kommunist, Communist, 1960, No. 1), Minister of Culture of the USSR N. Mikhailov complains that "creative workers" in all branches of the Soviet arts, including the cinema, deliberately "attempt to tone down the question of contemporary elements in art." He reproaches those engaged in the cinema and the theater for sympathizing with modernistic tendencies which are penetrating the USSR from the West, for wishing to abandon the principles of "socialist realism" and for constantly attempting to evade Party control. Among artists, he says, there are frequent instances in which the "sacred" principles of the "Party nature of art" are ignored and an uncritical attitude to modernistic art adopted.

At the meeting of the Art Film Council Mikhailov called for new films about the "beautiful life" of the Soviet people in the cities and rural areas. But, unfortunately, such films are not popular with the people. Soviet writer, N. Vinta stressed the disparity between reality and its colorful portrayals on the screen in a story in 1956.

"The reaction of kolkhoz women to two 'hits' was quite sardonic," he wrote. They thanked God that "they had seen something of paradise. Others regarded the films as fairy tales since they depicted unlimited freedom, food fit for a king, etc. As a result, they played to empty houses."

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The Soviet leaders are now paying the price for their insistence that Soviet films deal with subjects taken from real life: directors and scenario writers have become more daring and have been portraying contemporary Soviet conditions in their actual unattractive and sometimes even tragic light. As a result the Party is critical of the "atmosphere of despair and gloom current in the new films. An article in Komsomolskaya Pravda, the organ of the Young Communist League, February 16, 1960, entitled "Let's Put Contemporary Life on the Screen," makes this point:

In many films, the sufferings of little, downtrodden people are presented endlessly, and with relish the makers of films make their heroes burst into tears.

The heroes of certain films move against a deliberately wretched background: antediluvial back yards with wash hanging on the line, dark kitchens, apartments littered with rubbish, crooked streets....

Literaturnaya Gazeta, Literary Gazette, (January 21, 1960), complains that Soviet films show "people whose destinies are uncertain, whose lives are wrecked," while Sovetsky Ekran, Soviet Screen, (1960, No. 2) observes that "very many doleful films have appeared!"

An article in Literaturnaya Gazeta, Literary Gazette, March 10, 1960, criticizes the "feeling of gloom and despair" evoked by many Soviet films:

Helplessness and hopeless longing have no place in our films. We have no need to educate whimperers and neurasthenics: We shall scarcely be helped in our work by people who consider that everything in life is predestined, that unhappiness is inevitable in life, not to mention longing and grief.

Another cause for Party discontent is the appearance of the motif of pity, of genuine humanism, as a new feature of Soviet films. For example, the picture "The First Day of Peace" was sharply censured because it ends with a Soviet and a German woman weeping at the graves of their husbands who had fallen in battle. It is attacked for provoking "a feeling of the vanity of that victory which liberated the world" (Izvestia, December 8, 1959).

The Party-view of film production, however, is being opposed by many film directors. S. Gerasimov, for example, had this to say:

Throughout the world, people in general resemble each other. They even resemble one another more than they differ. This thought is as old as the world (Iskusstvo Kino, Cinema Art, 1960, No. 2, p. 21).  
(more)

Director A. Zarkhi echoed his opinion:

Personal grief and disease strike men down in any society and under any regime: war brings suffering to all everywhere (Literaturnaya Gazeta, Literary Gazette, March 13, 1960).

This attitude reflects the paradoxical nature of Soviet film productions which often emphasizes ethical principles in direct contrast to the principles of "Communist morality." Under particular attack has been the depiction of characters who are exponents of non-resistance. This fact was stressed in a recent issue of Literaturnaya Gazeta:

There is a completely new, fresh tendency, which has evidently arisen as a protest against the stereotype, as an anti-stereotype.

A few recent films, for instance, have starred the young champion of non-resistance. He is always sickly and puny. People hit him on both cheeks. . . . but he puts up with the blows. . . . and seems to say, 'you beat me, and I will bear it patiently in order to change your views. . . .' This also cannot but produce an atmosphere of depression (Literaturnaya Gazeta, Literary Gazette, February 18, 1960).

One of the main purposes of the recently renewed efforts of the Party Central Committee for tighter control of the arts is to integrate creative workers into a program in which the Soviet arts will be used as an instrument of Soviet propaganda on a global scale. This was made clear by a recent article in Kommunist:

Never, in any period or in any country, has anyone been confronted with such tasks of universal historical significance, with tasks so infinite in their variety, vividness of subject, materials and human characters, as the Soviet Socialist arts (Kommunist, 1960, No. 1).

However, despite the protests of the authorities, the Soviet arts and especially film production, continue to reveal a desire for truth, for true portrayal of life as it is in the USSR, for humanity and humility, and for faith in the strength of the spirit. The reprimands and exhortations of the authorities appear to have lost some of their effectiveness in the face of the desire for spiritual emancipation, and the Soviet cinema, like other branches of the Soviet arts, has to some extent escaped from the yoke of all-embracing Party control.

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